

Cabrini-Green: past, present, and future

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Allison Thurman

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Beth Messner

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth A. Messner". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2006

Abstract

Cabrini-Green, a housing project in Chicago, IL, has become infamous across the country for gangs, violence, and drugs. Created under the Chicago Housing Authority in the late 1950's, Cabrini has a history of segregation as well as strong community. After forty years, the ever-changing neighborhood that Cabrini resides in, the Near North neighborhood is undergoing a major transformation. Due to issues regarding the project itself as well as its prime location near the Gold Coast, Cabrini-Green is currently being torn-down. Brick by brick, a community that thousands of residents once called home is disappearing. I have portrayed sides of Cabrini that I believe most do not normally see. I present the project in its golden years, explore what gave Cabrini its negative reputation, reveal the changes in the neighborhood, and give my hopes for the future.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Dr. Beth Messner for advising me through this project. Her passion inspired me to choose the topic and her teaching helped me to finish it.

I would also like to thank Leslie Hunter for taking the time to speak with me and Nathan Radomski for his photography assistance.

My name is Allison Thurman and I am a Senior Honors student graduating with degrees in Communication Studies and French. For my Honors College Senior Thesis Project, I have chosen to study and display a unique and dynamic neighborhood in Chicago, IL, Cabrini-Green. My initial interest in this housing project began when I was an intern in Chicago at the Center for Student Missions. I decided upon this topic after enrolling in COMM 333: The Rhetoric of Oppression. In the following pages, I have presented Cabrini-Green as I have perceived it. I have included the past, present, and future of this ever-changing neighborhood that includes research, resident testimony, pictures, as well as some of my own insights. Goodbye Cabrini, you will be missed.

Cabrini/CHA Timeline

- 1929 *The Gold Coast and the Slum* by Harvey Zorbaugh
- 1930s CHA is founded
- 1943 Frances Cabrini Homes (row houses) built in "Little Italy"
- 1958 Cabrini Extension (high rises) built
- 1962 William Green Homes (high rises) built
- 1978 Atrium Village, Evergreen-Sedgwick Apartments (mixed income) built
- 1981 Mayor Jane Byrne moves into Cabrini-Green
- 1988 CHA Director Vincent Lane launches Operation Clean Sweep
- 1995 HUD takes over the CHA
- 1996 Plans for evacuation/redevelopment are unveiled
- 2000 CHA "Plan for Transformation" is approved

1929

Author Harvey Zorbaugh publishes *The Gold Coast and the Slum*. This book documents the social and economic conditions of Chicago's Lower North Side by contrasting it with the adjoining Gold Coast area. He describes the Lower North Side as "a slum, without fear of contradiction." Shortly thereafter, University of Chicago scientists will divide the city into 77 community areas, renaming the Lower North Side the Near North neighborhood, as it is known today.

1930s

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) is founded to provide decent homes for Chicago's poor. The agency was led by executive director Elizabeth Wood and chairman of the board Robert Taylor, both New Deal social reformers. Both Wood and Taylor fought to prevent public housing from being located in exclusively poor, black neighborhoods on large secluded plots. They lost this battle to the Chicago city council and were eventually forced to resign.

1943

The row houses of Frances Cabrini Homes are built and 581 families move in to the Lower North Side's "Little Italy." The Homes consisted of 55 two- and three-story buildings resembling army barracks. They were squeezed into two square blocks. Initially, residents of Cabrini Homes were two-parent families. Cabrini Homes also was racially integrated. The project was regarded as the first step towards rejuvenation of the Lower North Side.

1958 - 1962

Cabrini Extension is erected containing 15 high-rise buildings holding 1,896 apartments in 1958. In 1962, the Green Homes are added, consisting of 8 high-rises holding 1,096 apartments. The public housing project now acquires the name Cabrini-Green Homes. Cabrini-Green changed from a site covering 16 acres to 70 acres; from two and three-story houses to nineteen-story buildings; from a population of 2,000 to 18,000; from 80% white to almost completely black; from predominantly two-parent families to single-parent families.

1978

Atrium Village, a private housing, mixed-income development with 307 apartments, is developed by LaSalle Street Church in cooperation with three other local churches. Strategically built in the wasteland between Cabrini-Green and the lakefront condominiums, the Atrium has served as a significant bridge between the two groups. Low-income tenants can now live in a \$400 apartment for \$40 right next door to middle-class renters. Atrium Village will become an important model for solutions to future displacement.

1981

Mayor Jane Byrne and her husband, Jay McMullen, move into Cabrini-Green as on-and-off residents for three weeks to show her determination to stand up against gang violence. The event gains Cabrini-Green national recognition and Chicago reporters state that life begins to improve for Cabrini-Green residents. The hopefulness is short-lived, however, as a *New York Times* headline reads a year later: "Fear Returns to Project Where a Mayor Stayed."

1988

CHA Executive Director and Chairman Vincent Lane launches "Operation Clean Sweep" to attack gang violence in all of Chicago's public housing units. All of the family high-rises are "swept" for drugs, weapons, and illegal tenants. CHA is accused of violating residents' civil rights and the American Civil Liberties Union files a class-action lawsuit against CHA on behalf of the tenants. "Operation Clean Sweep" later expands to "the Anti-Drug Initiative." The agency continues to lose resources and gain controversy.

1995

Due to CHA controversies as well as serious management problems, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) takes over the CHA, forcing out Lane and all other board commissioners. Joseph Shuldiner is appointed as Executive Director. He begins a four-year period that brought the biggest change for CHA since the 1950s. Demolition of Chicago's public housing high-rises begins.

1996 - 2000

Plans to turn part of Cabrini-Green into a mixed-income development are unveiled in 1996. However transformation is delayed by litigation until 2000. In February 2000, HUD approves CHA's "Plan for Transformation." The Plan, representing the largest reconstruction of public housing in the nation's history, "seeks to renew the physical structure of CHA properties, promote self-sufficiency for CHA residents, and reform administration of the CHA." (CHA, 2003)

Not the original plan

The Cabrini-Green of today is very different from its original state. In the late 50's and early 60's, when the red and white high rises were added to the already-existing row houses of Cabrini, residents were excited to move in to an attractive and appealing neighborhood. Their surroundings were safe and enjoyable, and soon a tight-knit community was formed ~ the Cabrini-Green family.

With green grass, well-groomed yards, and fresh paint, Cabrini-Green was a nice place to live. Wanda Hopkins, a former resident, recalls, "It was so new and so pretty and the grass was green." (Whitaker, 2003, p. 53) Viola Holmes, a lifetime resident, adds, "I thought I was livin' in heaven. I'm not kidding, it was beautiful." (Whitaker, 2003, p. 36) At that time, residents had their own gardens, kids were excited about the newly-installed elevators, and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was very involved in the upkeep of the neighborhood. Residents were fined for littering and awarded prizes for how well they kept up their home and yard. Janitorial staff were familiar faces in the buildings, helping to clean and maintain the fresh, new look of the high rises. Unfortunately, the neighborhood did not maintain this positive image. Wanda continues, "... I look at it now after all these years and I can just remind myself of how it was and I can tell people that this was not the original plan." (Whitaker, 2003, p.53)

The residents who have lived there the longest know Cabrini best. "In Cabrini we all treated each other like family. As long as you knew someone in the neighborhood, you were safe," Joseph Berrios, a local Hispanic politician, recollects about living in Cabrini. (Fuerst, 2003, p.66) The sense of community that originally emerged in the Cabrini neighborhood turned neighbors into family. Everyone looked out for one another. Parents looked after their kids as well as their neighbors' children. Neighbors trusted one another and there was less worry. Arzula Ivy remembers, "We could go to the store and leave our doors open or our windows up and nobody would come in here." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 16) Another resident, Marjorie Davis adds, "You could sleep in your backyard if you wanted." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 16)

Mutual trust and respect between neighbors was essential to creating the Cabrini that once was. Margaret Wilson expressed this respect when she said, "You had very good neighbors.

To me, they were the most sophisticated people in Chicago. I think everybody must have known Mayor Daley personally; that's the way it appeared." (Fuerst, 2003, p. 185) This metaphor of the Cabrini family can be seen in the activities that occurred in the neighborhood. From block barbeques to basement parties, there was always something to do and someone to do it with. Gerald Washington, born and raised in the row houses, reminisces: "They used to have these block parties, and everybody would come out for it and people would skate, and there would be live music, and we'd have polishes, chicken, hot dogs, hamburgers, and it was like a little carnival on the street and it was real cool and a lot of fun." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 76) Other families remember taking the bus to Riverview Amusement Park, swimming in Stanton Park's pool around the block, roller skating on the blacktop, walking to Lincoln Park, or heading over to one of the many community organizations like the Lower North Center.

Community organizations have been very important to this emerging community. Providing centers for recreation, annual festivals, family services and more, the local community organizations became a vital asset to the neighborhood. Seward Park, which looks much different now than it did at its completion in 1908, offered baseball fields, basketball courts and a playground. Stanton Park, also built in the early 1900's, included a fieldhouse, playing fields, swimming facilities and a gymnasium, which provided a setting for many youth programming activities of the area. The Lower North Center, mentioned above, provided support for young people through recreation, academic help, counseling, leadership skills, and more. Local schools, Friederich von Schiller, Sojourner Truth, and Edward Jenner Academy of the Arts have served generations of students in the Cabrini-Green complex. The neighborhood has also been continuously filled with religious institutions providing significant support for the neighborhood. St. Joseph's Church, Wayman African Methodist Episcopal, Holy Family Lutheran Church, and Sunshine Gospel Mission all have lists of services and support to offer to the community. (Whitaker, 2000) Most of these organizations have existed as long, if not longer than Cabrini has been standing. However, many organizations have also undergone a lot of change, right along with the neighborhood.

Residents' close connections with their neighbors, CHA's involvement, and active community organizations all made Cabrini-Green an attractive, safe, and fun place to live in its early years. It was so interesting for me to hear from lifetime residents of Cabrini who were so

proud of their home in its beginnings. While much of this sense of community has endured, the safety and overall ambience in Cabrini-Green unfortunately has not. However it is important to remember that despite what may have plagued Cabrini and affected its current reputation, that was not the original plan. As Margaret Wilson said, "Don't let anybody fool you about Cabrini. Even with all of the negativism that you hear, this was a very special place. They may not realize how special and different it was, but it was for me." (Fuerst, 2003, p.185)

Spotlight Story

Holy Family Lutheran Church has been a significant part of the Cabrini-Green community since 1962. The church sits amongst the red high-rises on 542 N. Hobbie. Pastor Charles Infelt, known as Pastor Chuck, has been very active in the neighborhood as a spiritual leader, role model, basketball coach, and more. (Whitaker, 2000, p. 58) Leslie Hunter, youth minister for Holy Family, grew up in Cabrini and has just published a book and CD of his own poetry.

Through the forty years Holy Family has been present in the community it has served a great many purposes. First and foremost, Holy Family has served as a safe haven for community members as well as a respected leader sought after for help and advice. In addition to the church's Sunday worship services, Holy Family also offers a variety of programs for Cabrini residents. The CabriniAlive, now known as HopeAlive, program brought volunteers from all over into the community to work. Volunteers would rehab apartments, painting, constructing, and doing whatever they could to help out. The program also provides a number of social workers to assist Cabrini residents in reaching any long-term goals. The church's Take Our Daughters to Work program has granted invaluable opportunities to young girls in Cabrini, including an invitation to the White House by President Clinton. The Boyz in the Hood program, run by youth minister Leslie Hunter, is a mentoring program where the group meets on a regular basis and takes frequent field trips. Holy Family also offers an after-school program for kids ages 5 to 13 that provides a computer lab and an After Hours Zone. Holy Family has paired up with Moody Bible Institute to run SLAM: Saving Lives through Athletic Ministry. The youth group also participates in Sunday School and goes to camp every summer in Branson, MO. Finally, Holy Family heads up its own Career Development Program to assist residents of all ages with their vocational futures. (phone interview, March 31, 2006)

Holy Family Lutheran Church is one of the few, but vital resources that still remains in Cabrini. They have had a significant presence in the community thus far and according to Hunter, plan to remain in the community as long as there are still people there to serve. "Who we are is who we want to be. There for the good of the community, to serve the needs that

exist,” says Hunter. (phone interview, March 31, 2006) It is good to see that the strength and influence of the church has withstood the changes of the community.

A 180 degree turn

The downfall of public housing in Chicago is a complex, multi-layered problem. There is no general consensus about what caused the problems of CHA housing like Cabrini, but one thing is for sure; things are no longer how they used to be. Residents who lived in Cabrini during the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. cite this event in history as a turning point for Cabrini's fate. Others recall the shooting of two Chicago police officers as the beginning of a change for the worst. From a more sociological standpoint, family dynamics may have played a large role in what went wrong in this neighborhood.

The assassination of MLK is a tragic and pivotal event in U.S. history, but is also significant for Cabrini, a prominently African-American community. This tragic moment triggered many fights between whites and blacks, and stirred up a lot of destruction and violence, including riots, looting and burning local businesses, and shootings. Resident Zora Washington comments on the assassination: "How could you help not being depressed? It was like we lost hope. The person that could do it for us was gone. It was a terrible time." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 26) The Near North neighborhood was thrown into such turmoil that the National Guard was called in to maintain a peace and all local residents were put on curfew. (Popkin, 2000) However, the police sent to the area began firing openly and randomly, causing local gang members to shoot back. Many residents of Cabrini were too afraid to even look out their apartment window for fear of being hit by stray bullets. The riots became a nightmare for Cabrini-Green. Ms. Washington continues, "You knew the neighborhood that you lived in, and that black people had torn it up and the powers that be were not going to fix it up." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 26) Although I was not alive during this time, hearing how this event personally affected a community like Cabrini has added even more significance to MLK's assassination.

Almost twenty years later another act of violence affected the entire Cabrini community. Two policemen reporting to the 1117-1119 complex were killed by snipers from a vacant apartment. Following the incident, Chicago police began raiding Cabrini, breaking down doors and getting people out of bed to investigate the killings. Many residents believe that this violent incident and its aftermath, along with the riots that occurred after MLK's death, brought about

a change in the project's incoming residents. "After they killed those cops, it really wrecked everything. The CHA had began to stop screening people...and people from all over the city of Chicago was moving in 'cause they were low-income people and they would bring their ways and their habits with them," says Debra Wilson. (Whitaker, 2000, p. 121) According to Rochelle Satchell, "They moved a whole new - I would say a whole 'nother culture of black folks in...The basements that adults used to open up for the children for activities were bein' shut down, uh, drinking increased among teens, and smoking. It was just a 180 degree turn." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 99)

Former resident Anita Walker sums up this change in resident demographic: "Then came the era when children began having children...they became parents too soon, and they began to fill up the vacancies." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 83) Around this time, laws regarding public assistance began to change. A family that consisted of a single mother could receive more money than if her husband was there. Thus, fathers or husbands began moving out. (Popkin, 2000) Ms. Walker adds, "With most of them not having fathers they [the children] didn't know how or what to imitate...so I feel its like they're trying to play a piano in the dark. They don't have a clue as to what their places are." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 89) Joseph Berrios agrees. "When you had fathers leaving, kids felt that they had to bring money in, and, all of a sudden, gangs out there gained more and more power," (Fuerst, 2003, p. 67)

Decreased emphasis on family, new residents with different standards, and increased violence were not the only things changing for Cabrini. Many authors also recognize this era of change as the beginning of CHA's neglect of the physical property. As residents took less personal responsibility and violence in the neighborhood became more intimidating, CHA employees were seen less often around the buildings. Ms. Satchell recalls,

The place began to deteriorate, because the services were no longer rendered, and you couldn't keep it up. Like for instance, all the stairways used to have doors to them, but they began to take the doors off...you didn't know what was on the other side of that hanging door. They didn't have light fixtures no more. When the transitions took place, it wasn't safe. It was scary. It was like going trick or treating every day around here. (Whitaker, 2000, p. 102)

Toward the end of this period, lead paint poisoning, dangerous windows, cockroaches, unprotected radiators, and broken elevators attributed to many resident injuries and even fatalities. (Popkin, 2000) This factor, in my opinion, is of great significance. Once the CHA stopped caring enough to monitor and take care of their buildings, I don't know how anyone would expect the residents to be proud of the buildings that they call home.

It seems multiple factors contributed to what may have gone wrong in Cabrini. Whether one considers the death of a legend, an act of violence, or changes in family demographics, it was certainly the end of an era. It was the end of feeling safe in or outside of an apartment, the end of trust amongst neighbors, the end of counting on one other, the end of block parties, and a troubled time for what was once a beautiful and harmonious community.

That's just the way it is

As the financial and social situations in Cabrini worsened, residents young and old began turning to other drugs or illegal activity for a quick fix. Beginning in the 1970's and climaxing in the mid-1980's, gangs began to take control of low-income neighborhoods such as Cabrini, bringing many consequences along with it. Cabrini-Green and other CHA projects were unique settings for gangs to flourish for a number of reasons.

The high rises of public housing began presenting a problem for many neighborhoods in Chicago. The height of the buildings worked well for surveillance and sniper activity. Vacant apartments became hubs for gang activity. The open and unsecured buildings and grounds provided easy access for drug clientele as well as ready hiding places from the police. (Poppin, 2000) A neighborhood like Cabrini was ideal for drug trafficking. Many residents became regular customers along with white, upper-class residents of Lincoln Park and the Gold Coast. The other thing Cabrini offered was youth. In this neighborhood the majority of residents were under 18 years old; gang leaders preyed on vulnerable and desperate teens to recruit members.

Poverty provides an ill-fated situation that often leads to crime. "Its unfortunate, but a lot of people are like, my mama can't give us stuff 'cause she got rent and bills and she's not gettin' paid enough with this many kids...so I'm gonna be a man. My daddy ain't here so I'm gonna be a man and take over the house and bring money in. That's the way it is now." (Whitaker, 2000, p.176) This quotation comes from resident Anita Gunartt. She is explaining the plight that young boys who are living in poverty face; they have very difficult choices to make. It is this scenario that describes how gangs were able to recruit so many young men and gain power in Cabrini. Gangs offered quick money to those without it, protection in a rough neighborhood, and a sense of belonging for those who felt lost. They utilized violent threats and peer pressure. A well-known resident who goes by the name Sugar Ray Dinky explains: "The money, sellin' the heroin and the drugs, the money is too big for the kids, you know. They get those sixty, seventy dollars, and they're not thinking about a baseball game." (Whitaker, 2000, p.129) Debra Wilson adds, "You can't tell the gang members that this is not the way. Even though they might think that what you're saying is right, the peer pressure is too much, the

money is too much.” (Whitaker, 2000, p.129) Richard Blackmon, a resident, talks about how gangs affected his own family: “I remember having a conversation with my brother once about not selling drugs, and going back to school. And he said to me, ‘Look at my feet. What you don’t understand is that you got to do what you got to do to wear shoes, and I got to do what I got to do to wear shoes. I’m not proud of what I do,’ he said. ‘I’m not happy about it. But I still need shoes.’” (Whitaker, 2000, p. 187)

As gangs gained more and more power, gang violence became the norm in this once-safe community. Young boys learned quickly about what side of the gangs to get on or where to avoid to stay protected. According to Jan Morgan, “It didn’t matter if you in a gang or not, if you comin’ from this way at that time, they think you one of them. You don’t know which way to run. Every time we went home anytime past night fall, you takin’ a chance just getting home. We seen it everyday.” (Whitaker, 2000, p.109) Teachers and principals at local schools in Near North would conduct drills to practice for shootings. They would sound a horn and have students drop to the ground and crawl to the front door and get in the doorway. Some school days were cut short because the gangs were outside warring and parents came to get their kids out of the school. Living in these conditions made many residents numb to violence. People began to accept fear and tragedy as “just the way it is.” “Everybody who grew up here knows when you say split, that means you go that way and I’ll go that way cause somebody back here’s fittin’ to start shootin’ at us and if we runnin’ together one of us gonna get burned up, and maybe both of us,” adds Jan Morgan. (Whitaker, 2000, p.110)

Efforts by local police and the Chicago Housing Authority to combat the problem dwindled. 911 calls for the police were no longer responded to in a timely manner, if at all. Other efforts, such as a two-week stay by Mayor Jane Byrne or CHA’s Anti-Drug Initiative, had little effect on the situation. One of the biggest obstacles to taking control of the gangs, in addition to lack of law enforcement presence, was a lack of cooperation. (Popkin, 2000) The gang members and drug dealers of Cabrini were also residents of Cabrini, possibly friends or family of other residents. Therefore, many residents were hesitant to rise up against the power that began to control their buildings and they began “minding their own business.” With no protection from the police, “ratting out” the criminals could have fearful consequences. Influential drug dealers were essentially the only ones in the community with significant power

and resources. A gang conflict or a gang treaty could have more effect on a Cabrini resident than anything that the Chicago Police Department or the CHA could do. (Popkin, 2000)

Many of Cabrini's youth were still able to overcome these obstacles, however. A large number of the community organizations cited earlier have been in operation as long as Cabrini has been standing. They have offered many alternatives to help young teens stay away from the drugs and violence and involve themselves in recreational or educational activities. Other young children were not so fortunate, however. Children were frequent victims of gang violence, sometimes hit by a wayward bullet. For others, simply witnessing all of the beatings, shootings, drug dealing, and substance abuse that surrounded them would have long-lasting effects. Mark Pratt, father and Cabrini resident, mentions that his kids "remember a lot of fun times...but they also remember the shootings." (Bezalel, 2000)

Cabrini, notorious

Although violence became routine in many CHA projects, and many crimes were never even reported to the police, the worst of crimes did seem to always make the newspapers or television news. A list of recent headlines from local Chicago newspapers illustrate this point:

- *Man testifies police kicked, punched him*, Chicago Sun Times, March 28, 2006
- *Again, gang gunfire is answered by silence from city's political leaders*, Chicago Sun-Times, April 29, 2003
- *Gang turf battle erupts at Cabrini*, Chicago Sun-Times, August 2, 2001
- *2 hit in crossfire at Cabrini*, Chicago Sun-Times, July 31, 2001
- *Sniper at Cabrini Green wounds police officer*, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (Wisconsin), November 29, 1998
- *Man slain after cop stabbed at Cabrini-Green*, Chicago Sun-Times, November 28, 1998
- *Girl, 9, assaulted at Cabrini-Green*, Chicago Sun-Times, January 10, 1997
- *Gunfire at Cabrini leaves four injured; Mob attacks cop chasing suspect*, Chicago Sun-Times, March 5, 1997
- *90 charged with selling drugs at Cabrini, Wentworth Gardens*, Chicago Sun-Times, October 29, 1996

Most outsiders may never step foot in the Near North neighborhood, but thanks to such reports, the majority know Cabrini as notorious for violence and crime. To be completely honest, violence was all I knew of Cabrini before visiting the neighborhood. Resident Richard Blackmon says, "There's no other housing development in the country that has a reputation as notorious as Cabrini. That it's notorious, it's not for the good stuff that happens. And there's a lot of good stuff that happens in this community, but it's the negative stuff that has given us that reputation." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 188)

One resident had to confront Cabrini's reputation while at school at the University of Iowa: "I tell people I'm from Cabrini-Green, most of the time they've heard about gang violence and stuff, so they expect you to be this outright, crazy person who may shoot you or rob you and they're not real eager to hang with you and stuff." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 148) Marsha Crosby also vents, "One thing that always frustrated me about the media is seeing that they always picked out the worst looking, drug addicted people to interview...and seeing that they always in the worst looking houses. You never had the camera on a nice looking apartment." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 179) Leslie Hunter, youth minister at Holy Family Lutheran Church, said that he believes Cabrini receives an unfair portrayal by the media. He believes that Cabrini has problems just like any other neighborhood, but it is stereotyped as a horrible place because of its immediate location to the Gold Coast as well as high-profile events such as the two police officers who were killed . But the reality is that "there is much more good than will ever be bad." (phone interview, March 31, 2006) I think it is important to expose the public to the good things also for a neighborhood to receive a fair portrayal. Tyrone Randolph agrees: "I knew things weren't too kosher in Cabrini by the way the media portrayed it. I think it was overly done because you'd turn on the news and you'd see the same things were happening in other neighborhoods...They'd make it seem like it's just like Beirut. It's definitely not perfect...Still, I love Cabrini. It's my home." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 133)

The rhetoric of oppression

Oppression is a common theme evident in discussions of the tribulations of the infamous Cabrini-Green complex. As the city of Chicago grew, the area previously known as the Lower North Side, became a port of entry for suffering immigrants. Most of its residents were foreign born and English was their second language.

The first notable population of immigrants was Irish immigrants who began arriving around 1865. The city began referring to the neighborhood as the “Kilgubbin,” described in the *Chicago Times* as:

...the terror of constables, sheriffs and policemen...It numbered several years ago many thousand inhabitants, of all ages and habits, besides droves of geese, goslings, pigs and rats. It was a safe retreat for criminals, policemen not venturing to invade its precincts, or even cross the border without having a strong reserve force. (Marciniak, 1986, p. 23)

This quotation relates to a discussion by Bosmajian in *The Language of Oppression* about the language of racism during the time of slavery. He notes that, “To liken Africans – any human beings – to beasts was to stress the animal within the man...and was an easy step to oppress them into slavery.” (Bosmajian, 1983, p.36) When the reporter compared the immigrants to pigs and rats, they were reduced to less than human, thus making it easier for others to accept their living conditions and to discriminate against them.

The area soon saw another wave of immigrants, these of Italian descent. The neighborhood previously known as the Kilgubbin was now referred to as Little Sicily, or Little Hell. The area began to gain notoriety for frequent stabbings, bombings, and shootings. Historian Rudolph J. Vecoli noted that because of this reputation, its residents “were often barred from employment and had difficulty moving into other neighborhoods.” (Marciniak, 1986, p. 25)

In the early 1900’s Henry Zorbaugh, author of *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, began researching the Lower North Side. He describes the neighborhood as a slum that, harbors many sorts of people: the criminal, the radical, the bohemian, the migratory worker, the immigrant, the unsuccessful, the queer and the unadjusted...The foreign

colony, on the other hand, is found in the slum, not because the immigrant seeks the slum, nor because he makes a slum of the area in which he settles, but merely because he finds there cheap quarters in which to live, and little opposition to his coming.

(Marciniak, 1986, p. 27)

I like this quote from Zorbaugh because although he is writing of the early immigrants, it speaks to many other populations today. I think it is important to stress that our fellow citizens living in poverty conditions is not because they brought it on themselves, but because those not in poverty give them no other options.

Following World War I, southern blacks began moving north into urban areas like Chicago and made neighborhoods like the Lower North Side home. This brought even more ethnic diversity to CHA public housing. Upon its founding in the 1930's, the Chicago Housing Authority has always been very conscious of the issue of race. For example, CHA's first executive director, Elizabeth Wood, implemented a neighborhood composition rule that maintained a preclearance site tenancy at 80% white and 20% black. (Popkin, 2000) However, many local whites found that they were largely ineligible for projects such as Cabrini-Green. Ultimately, this four to one ratio rule had to be abandoned in order to fill vacancies, and by 1945 the Cabrini project was over 40% black. (Popkin, 2000) As one can see from the accompanying timeline, it was only shortly after this change in racial demographics that the Cabrini high-rises were built. In relation to this tactic, Anthony Downs once said, "separation of groups is one of the oldest and most widespread devices for subordination of all societies." (Bosmajian, 1983, p. 44) By piling CHA's African-American residents into tall high-rises, the city began an era of racial segregation in public housing.

Seventy years later, residents of Cabrini, who are 99% African-American and all receive Section 8 assistance, experience forms of racial and socio-economic prejudice on a regular basis. Much of this oppression comes from local law enforcement. Resident Anita Walker recounts a story from her childhood:

When I was very young, my mother saw some guys beating a kid out in a parking lot. She called the police and said, 'someone's getting beat down here.' No one came so she had to call again. Still, nobody came. They were still beatin' him and, finally, she called and said, 'A white woman's getting beat over here.' Sixteen police cars showed up real

quick. Then, they came to our house and told my mama she better not make any more false reports. (Whitaker, 2000, p. 79)

Resident Marsha Crosby speaks of a frustrating incident when trying reporting violence to the local police: "I think that New Year's Eve, I think two [bullets] did come through my living room window...I always call the police afterwards and they were saying, 'well can't you just stay out of your living room?'" (Whitaker, 2000, p. 113) Still other accounts of prejudice from local police are more violent. Anthony Edwards comments,

The police over here are jerks...they treat us like, it's time for you all to get outta here, and they thinking everybody [is] the bad seed. We respect these cops, you gotta respect the job, but everybody has rights. Man, the police have hit me in my eye, hit me in my jaw, hit me in the back of my head, sayin, get your black ass outta here...they label all of us.(Whitaker, 2000, p. 174).

Other oppressive comments are made by local outsiders. In *Cabrini-Green in Words and Pictures*, numerous residents have told stories of the reactions that they receive from people they meet. Leslie Hunter, a youth minister in Cabrini, said in an interview that when he introduces himself to outsiders and tells them where he's from, a common response is, "Cabrini, what?!" Zora Washington adds, "As a young parent when people found out that I came from Cabrini it was like, 'oh, dear Lord, you live there, I would never guess.' My oldest daughter, where she works she told them she came from Cabrini and they were saying, 'well you don't look like you came from Cabrini.' So how do you look when you come from Cabrini?" (Whitaker, 2000, p. 86) Kiki Coleman had a similar experience with her own teacher: "Like my math teacher, one day I told him I didn't have my homework, that I forgot it at home. He says, 'well, was it because there were shooting? Did you lose it while you was running through a gang fight?'" (Whitaker, 2000, p. 179) Stereotyping and labeling what a resident of Cabrini-Green "looks like" or experiences is a subtle yet serious form of racial oppression.

Although Cabrini may have originally been intended as transitional housing, it is easy to see how so many residents ended up staying for almost a lifetime. Aside from the powerful sense of community, those who attempt to rise out of public housing are finding the struggle difficult. According to Allan Johnson, author of *Power, Privilege, and Difference*, "Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity; oppression tends to slam them shut." (Johnson, 2006, p. 38) I feel

that this section is of high importance to the rest of my project to really get a sense of reality for Cabrini residents. Racism and discrimination are not isolated events in this neighborhood; they are often causes for why public housing residents struggle.

CHAnge

A national symbol for public housing gone wrong, the CHA began to receive a lot of heat for the conditions of its buildings and the experiences of its residents. In addition to the city's problems with public housing, Chicago experienced what is referred to as "white flight." Between 1970 and 1975, half a million whites left the city limits for the suburbs, now referred to as Chicagoland (National Community Development Initiative, 2006). In response, the city has been, and is still taking steps to reform the face of Chicago's public housing sites in an attempt to draw residents back into the city.

In 1996, the Chicago Housing Authority revealed plans to transform the city's public housing, the Plan for Transformation, thus completely altering the lives of CHA residents. The following is a letter from CHA's Chief Executive Officer, Terry Peterson:

The following are statistics from the Chicago Housing Authority FY2005 Annual Plan: Plan for Transformation Year 6 as Cabrini-Green is affected:

Total Move Outs: 943

Temporary public housing: 258

Temporary HCV: 603

Permanent HCV: 79

Non-subsidized: 3

Total Move Ins: 828

Permanent Public housing: 669

Permanent HCV: 159

"No other city is doing more than Chicago to ensure that everyone in our city – regardless of income – can share in our success." – CHA CEO Terry Peterson

The city of Chicago is in the middle of a drastic makeover, and the best place to see it happening is right in Cabrini-Green. What makes the Near North neighborhood especially unique is its proximity to the Gold Coast, Chicago's prime realty spot. A lifelong resident of Cabrini, Hattie Calvin says,

Look at Cabrini. I'm sitting right in the Gold Coast on the most valuable land in the world. We're surrounded by areas that are being built up every day. I know there was a time when you couldn't get white folks to come through there. But now the white folks, they want the location. This has been coming for years (Fuerst, 2003).

Residents know how valuable the land is and also know how badly the city and private realtors want it. Debra Wilson's father used to tell her all the time, "you all better keep yourselves together because you're living on a gold mine." (Whitaker, 2000, p.203) Resident Mark Pratt identified the neighborhood as worth over \$175 million, with annual revenue of over \$1 billion. (Bezalel, 2000) U.S. Congressman Bobby Rush spoke at a local meeting saying, "The folks who want this land, they salavatin!" (Bezalel, 2000)

For many locals like Leslie Hunter, the first sign of gentrification was the brand new Dominick's grocery store on Division (phone interview, March 31, 2006). The site that stood out the most to me was the adjacent Starbucks coffee store. Even as an outsider walking through the neighborhood, I could see why there has been so much controversy over this area. While standing on the corner of Division and Crosby, I could see a red Cabrini high-rise, a million-dollar town home, and the majestic Chicago skyline. I only lived in Chicago for three months, but visited the neighborhood on a regular basis. Each time I came, I found something new. Just passing through the area I could feel the sense of urgency for change, and a stark contrast of cultures. The Near North neighborhood is definitely becoming a new neighborhood; the question I pose is how all of the change is affecting the people of Cabrini.

With 15,000 units out of the 25,000 planned already completed, Chicagoans are seeing the Plan for Transformation take place all over the city. As the statistics show, each public housing project is now a construction site for mixed-income units. The side of the Plan that Chicagoans may not see however, is the process residents are now undergoing for relocation. As high-rises are closed, evacuated, and torn down, many CHA residents are losing their homes and expected to uproot.

CHA residents are required to relocate at least once. Options include a housing choice voucher (HCV), temporary housing, or permanent subsidized or mixed-income housing. Each tenant is assigned a relocation counselor by the CHA. The counselor and CHA staff then determine if the tenant is "lease compliant." Those tenants that are considered to be compliant work with their counselor to match them up with new housing. Some residents are given an HCV to relocate to the suburbs or the south side of Chicago. This forces residents to leave their family and friends who are remaining in the area or relocating elsewhere. It also presents a problem for those residents who do not have reliable transportation. (Bezael, 2000) Living in the suburbs without a car makes it very difficult for one to get to work.

Other residents are now a part of a sixteen step process towards finding a new residence. The process includes a series of meetings, interviews, applications, etc. Those who are "admitted" (CHA, 2003) into the new mixed-income units must attend mandatory workshops on being a good neighbor and meet with their CHA counselors regularly. (CHA, 2003) Private residences run by managers also require other standards such as a credit check or drug test. Those families or individuals in temporary housing are residents that have chosen to move back to the buildings they were previously in that have been rehabbed. This however is not an option for most Cabrini residents; only the row houses will be rehabbed. The CHA has pledged to assist residents in the relocation process in every aspect. They have partnered with various other agencies and businesses around the city to provide social services as well as create more jobs for CHA housing sites. (CHA, 2003) Other programs, such as Holy Family Lutheran Church's "Good Neighbors" are assisting residents in filling out paperwork and moving locations. (phone interview, March 31, 2006)

A concern of mine that has yet to be eased is what happens to those residents who are not considered to be "lease-compliant?" According to the CHA, lease-compliance includes those tenants who: pay rent and utilities on time, keep their homes clean and safe, not allowing anyone who is not on the lease to reside in the home, and other rules. (CHA, 2003) After multiple attempts of contacting the CHA in person, via phone, and via email, I have received no response as to the specific number of persons considered to be a lease violator and what those residents are doing upon evacuation of their buildings. After reviewing all of the rules and regulations for new residence, it seems to me that many of Cabrini's tenants may not be eligible

for the change that is occurring. Although Mr. Hunter informed me that he had yet to hear of such a case amongst his church members (phone interview, March 31, 2006), I remain curious and concerned that many Cabrini residents are being left with no home and no assistance.

What about the community?

Resident reactions to the change around Cabrini vary from outrage to excitement; skepticism to hopefulness. It seems the biggest concern residents have voiced is their lack of control of what is happening in their own community. On February 22, 1997 a local meeting was held to discuss plans for the redevelopment of the Near North neighborhood. Cabrini-Green residents were not invited to the meeting; but, they came anyway. (Bezalel, 2000) In response to deconstruction that had begun in 1995, many residents felt that they should have been consulted about tearing down a community that belongs to them. A community activist who attended the meeting shouted, "You should've come to this community before you broke one ground, one brick!" (Bezalel, 2000) From the very beginning, residents began to fear that they would not be included in the new opportunities being built right in front of them. Another local man who attended the meeting, John Stevens, expressed his frustrations, "They're making all the decisions; feedin' you the crumbs...we want the bread off the table! The ham, grits...give them the crumbs!" (Bezalel, 2000)

Of the new mixed-income housing being built in the neighborhood, over 800 of the total units are reserved for market rate and affordable housing, while only around 300 are designated for public housing. (CHA, 2003) Compared to the number of total occupied units at Cabrini, almost 1,750, it is clear that residents have reason to worry. Resident Mark Pratt believes he has about a 90 to 1 chance of ever living in one of the new town homes. (Bezalel, 2000) Zora Washington adds, "The redevelopment is a nice thing but I believe it's a lie because the people that are living here, they are not the ones that are going to be living in the reconstituted Cabrini-Green. Let's get real." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 203) Although there are stories published by the CHA and told in local newspapers of Cabrini residents relocating to a newer and nicer apartment, I empathize with their concerns of being left out. Resident Marsha Crosby says,

They're trying to make it seem like they're doing everything that's there to help people in Cabrini and they're not. They're doing it to help the city, bring a lot of people from the suburbs into the city, make it more comfortable and desirable for them to live in the city (Whitaker, 2000, p. 208).

Seeing so much new construction across the street from your home, million-dollar houses, brand new parks and stores, and not feeling to be apart of it would, to me, be a very disheartening feeling. Resident Gloria Purifoy adds, "I look at the new Seward Park and it's so beautiful yet disgusting. What they're doing for this community now pretty much says that the people who lived in the community before were not worthy of it." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 204)

Other residents view the changes in Cabrini as a positive opportunity. Former neighborhood resident Jesse White says,

I want the redevelopment to go forward for them. I want there to be housing for the residents, but I want them to be selective about who they provide housing for, and I want them to be able to move expeditiously to get rid of those individuals who can't live in peace and harmony with their neighbors. We want this community to be one of the finest communities in the city (Whitaker, 2000, p. 202).

Many residents recognize that the buildings of Cabrini are in such bad shape that they are beyond repair and need to be torn down. Guana, a resident of Cabrini said, "Yes, some buildings should come down. Why, 'cause they're not fit to live in." (Bezalel, 2000) The CHA website, www.thecha.org, provides footage from a cable access program "A Better Place" which aired on Channel 23 on August 31, 2002 of former Cabrini residents who are more than satisfied with their new locations. Resident Marsha Crosby, also cited above, expresses her satisfaction as well:

I used to just worry so much about that, until one day I just said, 'I can't worry about it anymore. I prayed on it that when it comes time for the building to be torn down God will make a way, find some place for us to go. And then last year, in June, they told me that my name had been pulled out from many names to move down here [to the new houses]. So that was the answer to my prayers (Whitaker, 2000, p. 206).

I think that some of Cabrini's problems may actually be answered through the new mixed-income living; at least for those lucky residents like Ms. Crosby. The social isolation of Cabrini residents as well as being a target for discrimination will no longer be a problem in a mixed-income neighborhood. Also, by living in the new units, Cabrini residents now have access to a home that will be kept up, clean, and hopefully better protected than their previous housing. I

just hope that those who are integrating into mixed-income housing have a support system to help them with the cultural and social adjustments that go along with that.

Whether seen as a positive or negative change, the redevelopment still means change and also means saying goodbye to what many residents for so long have called their home. One resident comments, "No matter how bad Cabrini is or was or whatever, inside your home, that's your home. To be told that you got to get up and leave that's a bad feeling." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 204) Only a small number of residents remain in the Cabrini housing. This was confirmed on my final visit to Cabrini, April 5, 2006. Many residents like Mark Pratt have accepted vouchers, relocated to the south side of Chicago and are hopeful: "What's wrong with wanting something better? My family deserves a backyard, a basement, peace of mind. We can't get that here." (Bezalel, 2000) Others have moved into the new units which Leslie Hunter says "are nicer than my Pastor's or any place I've seen!" (phone interview, March 31, 2006) Even Peter Holsten, president of Holsten Real Estate Development Co. partnered for construction of the new Parkside development, said, "It's bittersweet because you've got residents in there whose lives are going to be thrown into turmoil...our CHA families are trying to move on with their lives, and the high-rises still, unfortunately, represent what they are trying to get away from." (Gallun, 2005) Unfortunately though, other residents are, for the purposes of my research, unaccounted for.

Spotlight Story

One of the most amazing and inspirational individuals to come from Cabrini-Green is a man by the name of Jesse White, and one of the best things about him is that he still hasn't left the neighborhood. Jesse White never actually lived in a Cabrini building, but moved to the neighborhood, living on Division St. and growing up as a part of Cabrini. In high-school, Jesse was a basketball and baseball star at Waller High, later to be known as Lincoln Park High. Following high school, he was granted an athletic scholarship to attend Alabama State University where he met two of his biggest role models: Martin Luther King, Jr., then his minister, and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a fraternity brother. (Whitaker, 2000)

Jesse graduated from Alabama and signed a contract to play for the Chicago Cubs, but was quickly drafted into the war. He served as a paratrooper in WWII in the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division. After the war he returned to Chicago to play for the Cubs. During the off-season, Jesse taught physical education at Jenner in Cabrini. He transferred to Schiller School where he spent 26 years teaching and coaching. (CyberDrive Illinois, 2003) While working in the neighborhood, Jesse founded, led, or inspired countless youth programs. He has always believed in setting a good example for youth and was looked upon as a father figure by hundreds of Cabrini kids. He coached track, wrestling, volleyball, and basketball. He led the drum corps as well as the largest Boy Scouts Troop in the nation at the time. In addition to being an incredible mentor for the kids, he often took them on trips to the circus, athletic events, and other places that they may not normally have an opportunity to go. One of Jesse's most recognized programs is the internationally-known Jesse White Tumbling Team. The team began performing locally and was invited by Chicago universities, the Chicago Bulls, and eventually every NBA team (except for the Lakers) to perform during half-time. The team was even invited to Tokyo, Japan and Hong Kong to represent the state of Illinois in the Chinese millennium. (Whitaker, 2000)

After serving 16 years as a State Representative in the Illinois General Assembly, representing a district that includes Cabrini-Green, Jesse White served as Cook County Recorder of Deeds. In November of 1998, Jesse was elected as the first African-American Secretary of State. In 2002, he was re-elected, winning all 102 counties. When reflecting on his

accomplishments, Jesse said, "I have to give back. I have to wrap my arms around something that is positive and to make a difference, and that's what I've been doing. There are a lot of beautiful young people in Cabrini-Green, a lot of wonderful people." (Whitaker, 2000, p. 58)

Jesse White, with his busy schedule, still makes time to visit Schiller and continues to head the Tumblers. As an incredible athlete, war veteran, teacher, and politician, I think Jesse's biggest accomplishment has been the lives he has influenced at Cabrini-Green.

The future of Cabrini

Though Cabrini-Green is slowly disappearing and the neighborhood rapidly changing, those who have remained have seen a lot. Leslie Hunter comments, "I'll tell you what I see that I've never seen before. You see people joggin' in the morning with their dogs, skate boarders, you know, a lot more white people. You never saw that before." (phone interview, March 31, 2006) George Robbins, previous owner of Robbins Barber Shop in Cabrini, was forced to relocate and is now right around the corner at Robbins Multicultural Barber Shop. (Bezalel, 2000) Although he has maintained some of his customers, "the price has gone up a little bit."

Is the CHA sticking to the Plan? CHA chief Terry Peterson stated, "When I came on board five years ago, part of the challenge I faced was doubt, mistrust, and broken promises. What I said then I'll say today; I'll keep my word. They'll move out, but we'll move them back in." (Grossman, 2005) It is too early to tell what the outcome for residents of Cabrini will inevitably be. I have gathered samples of concerns and success stories, but as for the final fate of Cabrini, time will have to tell. Kelvin Cannon, president of the local tenants' advisory council at Cabrini, said that his initial concerns about Cabrini residents being run out of the area have so far been eased. "There are too many lawyers involved for this to go wrong." (Olivo, 2005) I think the most important thing for the CHA, for Chicago, and many others, is to not forget about Cabrini. Ramsin Canon, a concerned writer agreed, "Just as the CHA must learn to not forget those in their care, must not lose track of them, we must not forget the horrors of the public housing projects, and allow those victimized to melt away into a sea of faces." (Canon, 2006) Leslie Hunter of Holy Family Church is also still not sure what will happen in the neighborhood. He knows that some folks will still be in the community and that their Boyz in the Hood program will keep going "as long as there are still boys in the hood." (phone interview, March 31, 2006)

Although I can offer no solutions, I have enjoyed offering my insights on this community. After more than a semester of researching, reflecting, and writing about Cabrini-Green, all I am left with is hope. I hope that those residents who have relocated with a HCV have joined other communities with just as many, if not more opportunities and support. I hope that the CHA families who have moved into the new mixed-income units are adjusting

well to their new environment, enjoy their neighbors, and take advantage of all that CHA is offering. I hope that those residents who were not considered lease-compliant have been successful in finding residence on their own, and will not simply become a number in the growing percentage of homeless in the city of Chicago. Finally, I hope that all of the residents and community members that have stayed are also adjusting well to the sights, sounds, and people of the new Near North neighborhood. I hope that they also keep the memories and sense of community that Cabrini brought, while teaching their new neighbors about what once was there before the new parks and town homes.

In conclusion, I think that Cabrini-Green has not simply been an isolated case study of a public housing site. I think Cabrini is an excellent model for many things that can be learned. We can learn from Cabrini residents about the importance of community. We can learn how public assistance such as Section 8, or the neglect of their assistance, can affect a building, a neighborhood, an entire city. And we will soon learn the effects of gentrification in such an area.

References

- Bezalel, R. (Director). (2000). *Voices of Cabrini* [Film]. Chicago: Facets Multimedia.
- Bosmajian, H. (1983). *The Language of Oppression*. New York: University Press of America.
- Canon, R. (2003, Nov. 19). The most complicated simple issue (Online) retrieved March 12, 2006. *Gapers Block Web Publication*, <http://www.gapersblock.com/airbags/archives>
- Chicago Housing Authority. (2003). Understanding redevelopment. Retrieved February 20, 2006. <http://www.thecha.org/relocation/overview.html>
- CyberDrive Illinois. (2003). *Biography for Jesse White Secretary of State*. Retrieved April 27, 2006. <http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/biography/biography.html>
- Fuerst, J.S. (2003). *When public housing was paradise*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gallun, A. (2005, May 16). Cabrini's Green. *Crain's Chicago Business*. p. 3.
- Grossman, K. (2005, Jan. 10). 14 Cabrini high-rises to close. *Chicago Sun-Times*. p.8
- Grossman, K. (2005, June 21). Construction at Cabrini to start next year; some residents fear they won't be able to live in new housing. *Chicago Sun-Times*. p. 8.
- Hirsch, A. (1983). *Making the second ghetto*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, A. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Marciniak, E. (1986). *Reclaiming the inner city*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs.

The National Community Development Initiative. (n.d.). The second city gets a second chance. Retrieved April 24, 2006. http://www.livingcities.org/sites/cities_chicago.htm

Olivo, A. (2005, June 21). Model shown for revamp of Cabrini site. *Chicago Tribune*.

Popkin, S., Gwiasda, V., Olson, L., Rosenbaum, D. & Buron, L. (2000). *The hidden war: Crime and tragedy of public housing in Chicago*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Venkatesh, S. (1997, Oct. 1). Inside Chicago's public housing. *The American Prospect*, 8, 34.

Whitaker, D. (2000). *Cabrini Green in words and pictures*. Chicago, IL: W3 Chicago.